Part I: Introduction

"The great challenge we face is to do right by the land we have made our own. 'We can be ethical,' Leopold wrote, 'only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in.' That is easier to do in our own back-yards than anywhere else, and seemingly easier in Wisconsin than most other places."

William Cronon
Landscape and Home:
Environmental Traditions in Wisconsin
Wisconsin Magazine of History, 1990

DAVID GIROUX

Enjoying a fall hike at Governor Dodge State Park

Chapter 1
Background

A. Purpose of the Wisconsin Land Legacy Report

The purpose of the Wisconsin Land Legacy Report *is to identify the places considered most important to meet Wisconsin's conservation and recreation needs over the next 50 years. Questions we sought to answer included: which lands and waters will be critical to conserve our native plants and animals and their habitats? Which places will most effectively provide satisfying outdoor recreation? What do we want our landscape to look like in the year 2050, and what role should protected lands play to reach this goal? Which special places will our children and grandchildren wish we had protected?*

Experience shows the value of making such plans. In 1909, John Nolen outlined a plan to protect some of Wisconsin's most scenic places as state parks. In 1939, the State Planning Board and the Wisconsin Conservation Commission (a precursor to the Department of Natural Resources) developed a *Park, Parkway, and Recreational Area Plan for Wisconsin* (*Figure 1*). In the 1960s, University of Wisconsin Professor Phil Lewis conducted a major inventory of ecologically-based corridors that helped many communities design park and open space initiatives. These plans, and others like them, "pushed the envelope" and changed the way that institutions and the public viewed land and water protection. Although it can take considerable time for the ideas presented in these "big picture" plans to reach fruition, their utility and worthiness is clear: they help establish a long-term context within which short-term opportunities can be identified and evaluated.

The Land Legacy Report is an opportunity to take stock of past accomplishments and to chart a course for future protection efforts. Our children and grandchildren will, of course, make their own land use decisions. They may or may not try to protect all the places identified in this report. But the decisions we make now will affect the quality of the natural world that we leave behind, as well as opportunities that future generations will have to enjoy the outdoors. More importantly, the landscape we leave our children will also shape their hopes and visions of Wisconsin's future.

B. What this report is and what it isn't

This report focuses on identifying places that citizens and Department staff believe to be critical to meet the state's long-term conservation and recreation needs, given our current understanding of ecosystem management, the distribution and abundance of our natural resources, and environmental and recreational trends. The report is intended to serve many functions. First and foremost, the report is an educational resource that we hope many residents can use as they participate in land use decisions throughout the state. At its heart, the report is an "annotated inventory" that provides a broad perspective on the "green infrastructure" so critical to our state's future.

The report is also intended to provide a common context from which landowners, non-profit conservation and recreation groups, local governments, regional planning commissions, businesses, the Native American Tribes, state and federal agencies, and others can work as they approach decisions about land protection, use, and management. Although no single document can meet the wide variety of planning needs, we hope this report can be a central information resource that helps facilitate productive dialogue among many parties.

The purpose of the Land Legacy Report is to identify the places considered most important to meet Wisconsin's conservation and recreation needs over the next 50 years.

As readers will note, many of the places identified in this report have been the focus of past protection efforts to varying degrees. In some cases, the places are entirely protected through some type of formal, permanent arrangement; in others, a moderate or only a limited amount of protection effort has been initiated. No doubt, our existing public land base and lands owned by private conservation and recreation groups are the foundation from which the majority of future conservation and recreation needs will be met. This report attempts to highlight some of these past and on-going efforts as well as identify existing and future gaps in our "portfolio" of protected places.

The report is **not** a list of places that the Department of Natural Resources wants to buy. It is not intended to identify **how** or **when** these places should be protected or **who** might take the lead in implementing protection measures. Many partners and stakeholders will need to be intimately involved in evaluating options and opportunities for these places. Protection strategies will need to be customized to fit local requirements, needs, threats, and opportunities. Groups, ranging from local sports clubs to the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation to farm and forestry organizations, may be able to help landowners in different areas with different types of land protection "tools." Of course, finding a successful formula for protection depends most prominently on the area's landowners—their vision of the future will determine if, when, and how these places are protected.

Finally, this report is not intended to chart a static course for future generations to follow. Many things will change over the next fifty years—some we think we can predict, most others we know we cannot. Although this report attempts to identify the best places to meet future conservation and recreation needs, it is not the intent of this report to exclude places from consideration for protection simply because they are not identified here. Recognizing the changing nature of our landscapes and environment, the continuing evolution of our understanding of how the natural world works, and shifting social and economic needs, this report will be most effective if it is updated on a periodic basis. Future generations will evaluate their needs and the landscape we leave behind, and determine what places are important to them.

C. How to use this report

There are many ways to apply the information in this report. We hope that readers can use the report to gain a sense of past achievements enjoyed by conservation and recreation organizations and agencies in protecting some of the state's jewels. We also hope that the report provides a clearer picture of the breadth and diversity of places that are believed to be most important to meet future conservation and recreation needs and how where you live fits into a statewide perspective. Although the number of places presented in this report is in some ways overwhelming, we are indeed fortunate to still have many wonderful places worth protecting in our state.

Maybe most importantly, we hope that you can use the *Land Legacy Report* to help envision how you want Wisconsin to look in the future and what you think needs to happen at local, county, and state levels, for your vision to become reality. Countless decisions made every day by landowners, businesses, and government representatives affect how Wisconsin's lands and waters are used and what options future generations will have to use and enjoy these resources.

The Department intends to use this document to organize and evaluate its efforts to protect and maintain Wisconsin's wealth of land and water resources. We also intend to use the report as a means to continue building partnerships with local and county governments, regional planning commissions, conservation and recreation groups, business interests, Tribes, the academic community, and many others to collaboratively address the "who, how, what, where, and when" of implementing protection strategies.

Work on the report focused on identifying places considered important from a statewide or national perspective. Many more places are important from a local or regional perspective and rightfully are viewed as high priorities by local communities. The results presented in this report should not be construed as an identification of the only places in Wisconsin worthy of protection. The report should serve as a lens through which projects and priorities are evaluated, not a screen through which proposals are culled.

Figure 1: Map from the report, *A Park, Parkway, and Recreational Area Plan for Wisconsin,* 1939[1]

As an example, Department staff will need to continue providing technical assistance on a variety of management issues to landowners throughout the state, not just within Legacy Places. Similarly, through the popular Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, the Department provides cost-sharing grants to local communities and non-profit groups to protect conservation and recreation areas of local and statewide significance. Many past grants have been awarded in areas within the Legacy Places, the Other Areas of Interest, or the Statewide Needs and Resources in this report and it is likely that many of the future Stewardship grants will follow the same pattern. But, it is possible that some future Stewardship grants may fall outside of the places identified in this report. This is entirely appropriate given both the intent of the Stewardship grant program (to provide funding for the protection of areas serving local or state priorities) and the changing nature of future priorities.

Readers are cautioned to understand that the listing of an area as a "Legacy Place" is not a legal designation and does not carry or imply any special rights or responsibilities to current or future landowners. The label "Legacy Place" does not preclude or prescribe either land uses or management actions; nor does it dictate changes to existing or future land use or management. At any given time, proposals too numerous to count are before federal, state, and local officials to expand businesses, improve roads, develop quarries and mines, build homes, discharge effluent and air emissions, and a host of other actions necessary for our society to function and prosper. To be sure, some land uses can have a detrimental impact on the lands and waters identified in this report. But it is not the intent of this report to impede the regulatory framework that citizens, through their elected representatives, both created and are subject to. We hope that the report, by identifying these important Legacy Places, helps to ensure that our conservation and recreation needs may be appropriately balanced among the various land uses needed to maintain a healthy environment, strong economy, and high quality of life.

The Department can help protect some of these areas, but only if the people of the state want them to be protected. Whether you live in a city or on a farm, whether you own land or not, whether you are a frequent participant in outdoor recreation or simply like the look and feel of rural Wisconsin, you have an important voice in determining the fate of the places identified here. By providing some overview information about these Legacy Places, we hope that you are encouraged to learn more about them and help shape appropriate strategies for their future.

D. Approaches to designing protection strategies

As you consider the places described in this report, think about what attributes, characteristics, and opportunities should be the focus of protection efforts. Which specific lands and waters are of utmost importance to meet conservation and recreation objectives? Are there critical core sites, surrounding buffer areas, and corridors to other important lands and waters? What types of land uses are best suited or compatible with the goals of the core sites, buffer areas, and corridor linkages? What are the most appropriate means or strategies to ensure that the area's conservation and recreation values are passed on to future generations? Answers to these types of questions will drive the creation of protection plans for each of the places described in the report.

Over the past several decades, field biologists have made significant gains in understanding the life cycle needs of many species. However, studying how species interact with one another and their environments is far more complicated. Our understanding of how ecosystems function and respond to different types of environmental change—ranging from the invasion of exotic species and diseases to changing groundwater flows to air and water pollution to climate change—remains largely unknown. Yet, as the science of conservation has grown, several troubling issues have begun to emerge. Maybe most notable is the realization that many of our existing protected areas are likely too small and too isolated to meet their conservation goals.

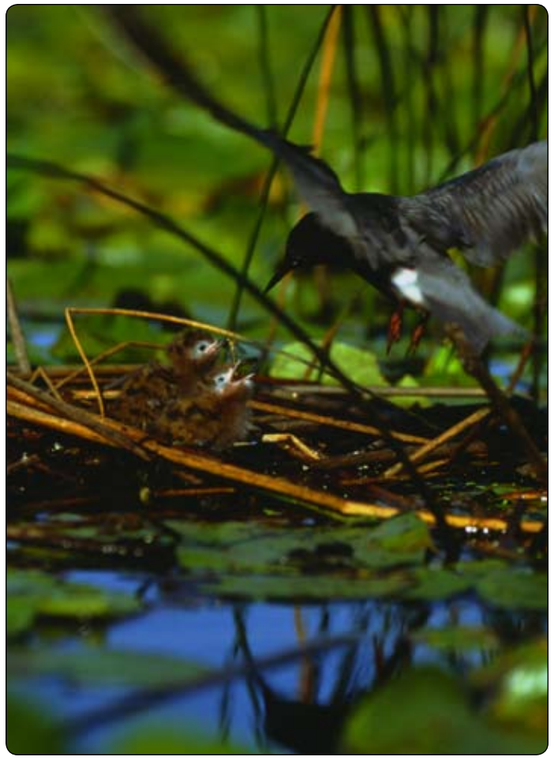
As local, state, and federal wildlife areas, parks and forests become increasingly fragmented, isolated, and impacted by changes to their environmental quality, the composition and diversity of species present slowly change. Those that need larger blocks of habitat or are particularly sensitive to environmental conditions are displaced by species better adapted to smaller areas or more tolerant of degraded habitats. Similarly, the random events that naturally occur over time—floods, droughts, fire, disease outbreaks, and others—have always played critical roles in the abundance and distribution of species. As protected areas have become increasingly isolated and fragmented, these random events can more easily result in the total loss of a population. How quickly, if at all, an area can be re-colonized is dependent on many factors, including the dispersal ability of the species, the proximity of source populations, and barriers to movement.

In light of the changes we have brought to our landscape, it has become increasingly clear that attempts to protect our conservation jewels will ultimately prove ineffective if they are not adequately buffered and connected to one another. As you and other citizens design and implement protection strategies for the places described in this report, it will be imperative to consider them not just as stand alone, independent entities, but rather within their broader ecological, social, and political context. How do the Legacy Places relate to their surrounding landscape and other nearby Legacy Places? What corridors should be maintained to link important conservation lands, within and across ecological landscapes? Of the more than 100 Legacy Places that are river-focused (and thus logical corridors), how can they most effectively be connected? What land uses should be encouraged in these connecting corridors and buffer areas?

Through a combination of historical events and the active, citizen-led efforts of those who preceded us, many of the state's most cherished sites have been protected. But many places worthy of similar protection status remain at risk and, in many ways, effectively protecting them will be harder than ever. Our state's economic health is increasingly stressed as farming, forestry, and manufacturing industries feel the effects of economic globalization. This, in turn, has influenced rural land use and ownership by altering the economics of what land use practices are profitable and how owners can most economically make use of their capital investment.


SCOTT NIELSEN

Orange Fairy-helmet mushroom (*Mycena leaiana*)



JACK BARTHOLOMAI

Black terns (*Chlidonias niger*) at Grassy Lake, Columbia County

In particular, many farmers are caught in a bind. Over the past several decades a combination of rapidly rising production costs and declining farm commodity prices have pushed net farm incomes down to the point that many farms are no longer profitable. Small farms are experiencing an especially difficult time; 83% of farms with annual gross sales of less than $10,000 and 54% of farms smaller than 260 acres lost money in 1997. Yet, as the profitability of farming has declined for many farms, the value of farmland has risen, in some cases considerably. In most cases this increase in the price of farmland is driven by its value for other uses, primarily housing development and recreational pursuits. Many farmers now find themselves losing money on farming while holding an ever-growing capital gain—their land. As a result, they face economic incentives (selling land for non-agricultural purposes) that can conflict with the long-term needs of the farm community.

Related to the ecologically-based questions posed above are potentially many others confronting the social and economic facets of protecting places that need to be considered as you and others develop protection strategies. If farmland is recognized as being a critical factor in maintaining the conservation and recreation values of our parks, wildlife areas, natural areas and other protected places (to say nothing of its critical importance in maintaining our rural heritage), what can we do to ensure that farmers can make a living in Wisconsin? Similarly, how can we ensure that our forests, from small woodlots to large industrial holdings, remain economically productive and are managed to help meet the needs of the state's forest ecosystem? How should we build and maintain a transportation network that not only helps form a foundation for economic growth, but also avoids adverse impacts to important conservation areas and promotes outdoor recreation? Wisconsin has many draws that make the state an attractive place to begin and expand businesses—a well educated workforce, excellent schools, low crime, and a tremendous natural resource base to name but a few. How can we nurture and expand the state's economic capacity in a way that both improves residents' financial standing and their quality of life?

There are no easy answers, but one issue appears clear: protection strategies for the places identified in this report will only be successful if they are integrated into broader societal needs. It may be that many of the "tools" our parents and grandparents relied on to protect outstanding places will not work in today's world. As a society we can afford to purchase some lands to meet critical conservation and recreation needs, but public land ownership is not the answer to many of the challenges that we face. We will need to find new, creative (and possibly dramatically different) ways to ensure that Wisconsin's lands and waters can meet the needs of generations to come.

E. History of the Wisconsin Land Legacy Report

In 1989, responding to public support, the state legislature created a landmark program that authorized the Department of Natural Resources and its partners to spend $250 million over a ten-year period for the purpose of acquiring land and developing outdoor facilities to expand recreation opportunities and protect environmentally sensitive areas. Later known as the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program, it allowed the state to purchase a wide variety of lands, from small prairie remnants to large flowages, to help meet Wisconsin's growing recreation and conservation needs.

In 1998, as its ten years of authorization were drawing to a close, then-Governor Thompson appointed a Blue Ribbon Task Force on the Stewardship Program to evaluate the program's effectiveness and propose potential alternatives for its future. The Task Force voiced strong support for the program and concluded that the state would be well served to re-authorize Stewardship funding for another ten years. In addition to several changes in the program, the Task Force recommended that the Department undertake a study to identify land acquisition needs for the next fifty years. In response, the Natural Resources Board passed a resolution in April, 1999 requesting that the agency prepare a report recommending future acquisitions of land and land rights through the year 2050.

At the Board's request, the Department undertook the work leading to this report in two steps. First, criteria were developed based on public and staff input to determine what types of land best met state needs for conserving important natural resources and providing outdoor recreation opportunities. Then, with the use of existing information on Wisconsin's natural resources, Department staff expertise, and input from the public, the criteria were applied to identify those places likely to be most critical to meet future conservation and recreation needs.

As work on the report progressed over the past three years, its focus shifted away from identifying which lands were appropriate for DNR to attempt to purchase. Instead, the Natural Resources Board, DNR staff and the public recognized that it would be more productive to concentrate on the large task of identifying places that were considered most essential to meet future conservation and recreation needs. Determining how much protection remains to be accomplished, the nature of the threats and opportunities, who might protect these places, how, and when, are all issues that would need to involve substantially more input from more people over a longer time period. Because these issues remain to be addressed in more locally-based evaluation processes, this report does not contain any recommendations of lands the Department should consider purchasing.